

The Relationship Between Principals' Moral Intelligence Components and Teachers' Professional Ethics with the Mediating Role of Job Motivation in Public Primary Schools

Shima Hadad*, Seyed Ali Siadat *, **

*Department of Curriculum Planning, Shahid Ashrafi Esfahani University, Isfahan, Iran

** Department of Education, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

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Abstract: This study aimed to examine the relationship between principals' moral intelligence components and teachers' professional ethics, with the mediating role of job motivation among public primary school teachers. The research employed a descriptive–correlational design. The statistical population included all principals and teachers in public primary schools of Falavarjan, Iran, during the 2023-2024 academic year. Using convenience sampling, a sample of 86 principals and 589 teachers was selected. Data were collected using three validated questionnaires: Moral Intelligence, Professional Ethics, and Job Motivation. The reliability coefficients (α) for the instruments were $\alpha = 0.89$ for moral intelligence, $\alpha = 0.88$ for professional ethics, and $\alpha = 0.95$ for job motivation. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and mediation analysis. Results indicated that principals' moral intelligence components were significantly positively related to teachers' professional ethics ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, job motivation played a significant mediating role in this relationship ($p < 0.05$). These findings suggest that enhancing principals' moral intelligence can improve teachers' professional ethics, particularly when job motivation is fostered. Implications for educational leadership and policy are discussed, including the need for training programs for principals focusing on moral intelligence and motivational strategies for teachers.

Keywords: job motivation, moral intelligence, primary school, professional ethics

1. Introduction

The rapid transformation of societies and the increasing complexity of the educational role of principals and teachers have highlighted the necessity of strengthening the ethical dimension in educational organizations. Schools, as environments that shape the character, ethics, and social functioning of future generations, require ethically oriented leadership and teachers who demonstrate high levels of professional ethics. In this context, principals' capacity to employ moral intelligence, the ability to apply moral principles such as integrity, responsibility, compassion, and forgiveness to their decisions and actions (1,2), plays a pivotal role in promoting ethical standards and fostering teachers' professional conduct.

Over the past decade, the importance of moral and ethical leadership in education has received increasing attention. Ethical leadership is characterized by fairness, integrity, and concern for the well-being of followers (3,4). Recent studies have shown that ethical leadership within educational

settings fosters an organizational climate of trust, respect, and psychological safety, which in turn promotes teachers' motivation and adherence to professional standards (5–8). Similarly, moral intelligence has been identified as a key psychological and behavioral competency that enables leaders to make principled decisions and act consistently with shared ethical values, thereby influencing the moral culture of the school (9–12).

Professional ethics of teachers encompass adherence to moral norms such as honesty, justice, transparency, respect for diversity, and accountability in the teaching profession (13,14). Teachers who act ethically contribute to the credibility of educational institutions and promote positive student outcomes and trust within the school community. As moral exemplars, teachers' behavior and decision-making have far-reaching consequences for students' moral and social development. Hence, the cultivation of professional ethics among teachers is not merely a professional expectation but a societal necessity.

Furthermore, job motivation has emerged as a vital psychological resource for teachers' ethical and professional performance. Motivated teachers are more likely to engage in reflective practices, maintain commitment, and uphold professional ethics even in challenging circumstances (14–17). Empirical findings suggest that intrinsic job motivation, which is driven by internal satisfaction, purpose, and meaning, plays a particularly crucial role in sustaining ethical professional behavior (18,19). A 2025 meta-analysis by Chen et al. (15) confirmed that job motivation significantly predicts teachers' engagement, ethical behavior, and overall job satisfaction. Consequently, school leaders' ability to cultivate an ethical and motivating environment becomes a determinant of teachers' professional integrity and performance.

Integrating these perspectives, scholars increasingly emphasize that ethical leadership and moral intelligence among principals enhance teachers' professional ethics both directly and indirectly through motivational mechanisms (6,20). When teachers perceive their principals as morally intelligent leaders who exhibit fairness, empathy, and consistency, their intrinsic motivation and ethical commitment strengthen, leading to more ethical professional practices (21,22).

However, despite a growing global body of literature on moral intelligence, ethical leadership, and teacher motivation, research in the Iranian educational context remains limited, particularly regarding the combined and mediating relationships among these constructs. While a few studies have examined moral intelligence or teacher ethics separately, comprehensive models exploring how teachers' job motivation mediates the relationship between principals' moral intelligence and teachers' professional ethics are scarce. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining these interrelated variables in public primary schools in Falavarjan, Iran.

Accordingly, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

Is there a significant relationship between principals' moral intelligence components and teachers' professional ethics?

Does teachers' job motivation mediate the relationship between principals' moral intelligence and teachers' professional ethics?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the growing literature on ethical leadership, moral intelligence, and motivation in education. The

findings are expected to inform leadership training, policy development, and the promotion of an ethical school culture in Iranian and broader educational contexts.

2. Research Elaborations

2.1. Research Design

This study employed an applied, descriptive-correlational design. Its purpose was to examine the relationships among three variables, including one mediating variable, without manipulating any factors. The study focused on analyzing existing relationships and quantifying correlations among principals' moral intelligence, teachers' job motivation, and teachers' professional ethics. The research falls within the domain of quantitative research.

2.2. Population

The statistical population consisted of all principals and teachers in public primary schools in Falavarjan, Iran during the 2023–2024 academic year. The region includes 86 primary schools, comprising 39 boys' schools, 35 girls' schools, and 12 co-educational schools. There were 86 principals and 589 teachers in total.

2.3. Sample and Sampling Method

A convenience ~~random~~ sampling method was employed. Principals were selected from participants attending regional meetings organized by the Falavarjan Education Department, while teachers were drawn from those attending annual staff organization events at neighboring schools. Sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (23) table, resulting in 70 principals and 235 teachers.

2.4. Instruments

Data were collected using three standardized questionnaires.

Moral Intelligence Questionnaire: Developed by Lennick et al. (1), this 40-item instrument measures four components of moral intelligence: honesty, responsibility, compassion, and forgiveness. Each component includes 10 items scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "always" to "never," with higher scores indicating higher moral intelligence. Cronbach's alpha for this study was 0.89, confirming good internal consistency. Content validity was confirmed by educational experts.

Professional Ethics Questionnaire: This 15-item scale, adapted from Vargas et al. (24), assesses adherence to professional ethics in educational settings. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Always" to "Never" (scored 5 to 1). Total scores range from 15 to 75, with higher scores indicating stronger professional ethics. In the present study, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$). The tool's validity and reliability have been established in prior research.

Job Motivation Questionnaire: Developed by Bakhshi-Ali-Abadi et al. (25) based on Herzberg's two-factor theory, this 40-item questionnaire assesses intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the workplace. Responses are measured on a five-point Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was 0.95. Content validity was verified by experts, and prior studies have confirmed the instrument's reliability and validity.

2.5. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed a systematic and structured approach. Participants received clear explanations of the study objectives and provided informed consent. Questionnaires were administered in-person, and participants were assured of confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and responses were used solely for research purposes.

2.6. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions, were calculated to describe the sample and main variables. Inferential analyses included Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis to examine relationships among variables. Mediation effects were tested using Baron and Kenny(26) approach for mediation analyses. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 27, with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed. Participants received full information about the study, consented voluntarily, and were assured that their responses would remain confidential. Scientific integrity and respect for participants' rights were maintained throughout the study and in reporting results.

3. Results and Finding

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented first. Among the 70 school principals, 52.86% were female and 47.14% were male, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution. Most principals (54.3%) were above 45 years of age, followed by 25.7% aged 35–45 years, 17.1% aged 25–35 years, and only 2.9% below 25. Regarding education, 57.1% held a bachelor's degree, 38.6% a master's degree, and 4.3% a doctorate. The majority (68.6%) had over 20 years of professional experience, reflecting a highly experienced managerial sample. Among the 235 teachers, 64.7% were female and 35.3% male. Most were aged 35–45 years (34%), followed by 30.6% above 45, 21.7% aged 25–35, and 13.6% below 25. In terms of education, 61.7% held a bachelor's degree, 34.9% a master's, and 3.4% a doctorate. Approximately 47.2% of teachers had more than 20 years of experience, 36.6% had 10–20 years, and 16.2% had less than 10 years. Descriptive statistics for the main variables are summarized in Table 1. The mean score of principals' moral intelligence was 157.65 with standard deviation (SD) of 18.93, with the highest mean in responsibility (Mean = 40.55) and the lowest in forgiveness (Mean = 38.35). Teachers' professional ethics had a mean of 61.20 (SD = 6.85), while job motivation averaged 175.48 (SD = 20.07). Skewness and kurtosis indices indicated normal data distribution, supporting the use of parametric tests.

All scales demonstrated satisfactory reliability: Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.89 for moral intelligence, 0.95 for job motivation, and 0.88 for professional ethics, confirming strong internal consistency.

3.2. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: Relationship between Moral Intelligence and Professional Ethics

Simple regression analysis showed that principals' moral intelligence significantly predicted teachers' professional ethics (standardized regression coefficients (β) = 0.487, $p < .001$). This indicates that higher levels of moral intelligence among principals are associated with higher levels of professional ethics among teachers.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the study variables, including mean, standard deviation (SD), skewness, and kurtosis for principals' moral intelligence, teachers' professional ethics, and job motivation.

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Principals' Moral Intelligence	157.65	18.93	-0.22	-0.62
Teachers' Professional Ethics	61.20	6.85	-0.27	-0.58
Job Motivation	175.48	20.07	-1.29	1.75

Hypothesis 2: Mediating Role of Job Motivation

To test the mediating role of teachers' job motivation between principals' moral intelligence and teachers' professional ethics, the four-step procedure of Baron and Kenny (26) was applied.

Table 2. Results of the mediation analysis showing the direct and indirect effects of principals' moral intelligence on teachers' professional ethics through job motivation, including standardized regression coefficients (β) and significance levels (p).

Predictor(s)	Outcome Variable	β	p	Mediation Note
Moral Intelligence	Professional Ethics	0.486	< .001	Direct effect
Moral Intelligence	Job Motivation	0.553	< .001	Predictor for mediator
Job Motivation	Professional Ethics	0.482	< .001	Mediator effect
Moral Intelligence + Job Motivation	Professional Ethics	0.231	< .001	Partial mediation observed

The reduction in β from 0.486 to 0.231 suggests that job motivation partially mediates this relationship. Thus, principals' moral intelligence affects teachers' professional ethics both directly and indirectly through increased job motivation.

Sub-Hypotheses: Components of Moral Intelligence

Regression analyses demonstrated that all four components of moral intelligence including honesty, responsibility, compassion, and forgiveness, significantly predicted teachers' professional ethics ($p < .001$). Responsibility ($\beta = 0.431$) had the strongest effect, followed by honesty ($\beta = 0.402$), compassion ($\beta = 0.388$), and forgiveness ($\beta = 0.368$). These findings indicate that developing these moral capacities in school leaders contributes to fostering ethical professionalism among teachers. As presented in Table 3, job motivation partially mediated the effects of all four moral intelligence components on teachers' professional ethics, highlighting its key role in linking moral intelligence to ethical behavior. The reduction in β values indicates that job motivation partially mediates the relationship between each moral intelligence component and teachers' professional ethics.

Table 3. Regression results for the effects of moral intelligence components on teachers' professional ethics, showing direct and mediated (through job motivation) standardized coefficients (β), significance levels (p), and the type of mediation observed.

Moral Intelligence Component	Outcome Variable	β (Direct)	β (With Job Motivation)	p	Mediation Type
Honesty	Professional Ethics	0.402	0.215	< 0.001	Partial Mediation
Responsibility	Professional Ethics	0.431	0.236	< 0.001	Partial Mediation
Compassion	Professional Ethics	0.388	0.199	< 0.001	Partial Mediation
Forgiveness	Professional Ethics	0.368	0.188	< 0.001	Partial Mediation

3.3. Demographic Differences

Independent samples t -tests (used to compare two groups) and one-way analyses of variance (F - tests; used to compare three or more groups) were conducted to examine differences in teachers' professional ethics and job motivation across demographic variables. The results showed that gender did not significantly affect teachers' professional ethics ($t = 1.82, p = .069$); however, female teachers reported significantly higher job motivation than their male counterparts ($t = 0.13, p = 0.034$). Significant differences were also found across age groups ($F = 3.21, p = 0.024$) and educational levels ($F = 2.87, p = 0.038$), whereas work experience had no significant effect on either professional ethics or job motivation ($F = 1.64, p = .108$).

3.4. Discussion

This study provides robust evidence that principals' moral intelligence positively influences teachers' professional ethics, with teachers' job motivation partially mediating this relationship. While previous research has separately highlighted the role of ethical leadership or teacher motivation in fostering professional conduct (6,8,10), the current study integrates these three constructs in a single mediation model, addressing a gap in the literature. This integrated approach demonstrates that moral intelligence alone is insufficient; its effect on teachers' ethical behavior is significantly strengthened when combined with motivational mechanisms, highlighting a novel pathway for ethical school leadership.

Among the components of moral intelligence, responsibility and honesty emerged as the strongest predictors of teachers' professional ethics. Prior studies have often examined moral intelligence as a global construct (17,27), but the present analysis demonstrates that examining individual components separately offers more precise guidance for leadership development, revealing which ethical capacities most strongly shape teacher behavior.

Demographic analyses revealed that female teachers reported higher job motivation, while age and educational level influenced motivation and ethical attitudes, whereas work experience did not. These findings suggest that leadership quality and school climate outweigh tenure in shaping professional ethics, a nuance less explored in prior studies (6,19).

A further contribution of this study is its focus on public primary schools, a context underrepresented in the existing literature. By examining principals and teachers within this educational setting, the findings offer practical insights for early-stage educational environments where ethical modeling and motivation may have long-term impacts on student development.

From a practical perspective, these results underscore the need for targeted training programs emphasizing the development of moral intelligence, particularly responsibility and honesty, in school leaders. Simultaneously, interventions aimed at enhancing teacher motivation, through meaningful work, recognition, and professional growth, can amplify ethical outcomes. Integrating ethics and motivation metrics into school evaluation systems provides an actionable strategy to cultivate a sustained culture of professional ethics.

Overall, this study advances understanding of ethical leadership by demonstrating the critical interplay of moral intelligence and job motivation in shaping teachers' professional ethics, highlighting specific moral capacities, and focusing on an underexplored educational context. These contributions provide both theoretical and practical implications for designing effective leadership and teacher development programs.

4. Conclusions

Principals' moral intelligence positively influences teachers' professional ethics, with job motivation partially mediating this relationship. Responsibility and honesty were the strongest predictors, highlighting the value of principled leadership. Demographic factors such as gender, age, and education also shaped motivation and ethics, whereas work experience had little effect. These findings emphasize the importance of developing moral intelligence in school leaders and fostering teacher motivation to promote an ethical school climate. Implementing targeted leadership training programs and motivational strategies can enhance professional ethics and overall school performance.

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